KEROUAC ON RECORD

A LITERARY SOUNDTRACK

Edited by Simon Warner and Jim Sampas

BLOOMSBURY ACADEMIC
LONDON • NEW YORK • OXFORD • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

CHAPTER 15

DETECTING JACK KEROUAC AND JONI MITCHELL: A LITERARY/LEGAL (NOT MUSICOLOGICAL) INVESTIGATION INTO THE SEARCH FOR INFLUENCE

Nancy M. Grace

> Criticism is the discourse of the deep tautology … Criticism is the art of knowing the hidden roads that go from poem to poems.
>
> Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 96

Singer-songwriter Joni Mitchell, one of the queens of twentieth-century rock'n'roll, found Beat artists annoying. 'That whole pocket of modern art is my least favorite in art history,' she told Tom McIntrye in 1998. 'I was kind of a Dadaist to the Beats in a certain way. Musically, they annoyed me. In painting, they annoyed me, and I made no bones about it.' When McIntrye tried to link her to them via Beat irreverence and 'anarchistic spirit', Mitchell refused to take the bait: 'I never was an anarchist. Never. No, that's probably why I don't like them. You need rules and regulations, but you need just ones.' Three years later, in an interview with Robert Enright, she once again distanced herself from them:

> I wasn't a fan of the Beats. I didn't like to see the underbelly revered. I figured it had its place, but I didn't want to be an imitator of it. I'm not a book burner but I longed for something more wholesome. God knows why I longed for the impossible. In high school I did a lot of satire on the Beats … (2001)

The literary likes of Agatha Christie and Dorothy L. Sayers, or A. S. Byatt and Julian Barnes, might find these declarations intriguing – such mildly venomous statements could well smack of disguise and subterfuge, especially since the public record reveals that Mitchell is not a denier of influence. Over the decades, she has identified artists from Stevie Wonder, Billie Holiday, Miles Davis, Ray Charles, Cab Calloway, Tom Wolfe and Charles Mingus to Pablo Picasso as having had an impact on her work. And she's even admitted to discovering influences as she's listened to recordings of her performances (Denberg, 1998). Then too, anyone who has both read Beat literature, especially the canonical work of Jack Kerouac, and listened to Mitchell's lyrics recognizes similarities in themes, imagery and voice – the focus on travel, the American landscape, and confessional introspection among the most recognizable.

So Mitchell's remarks trigger a literary mystery that generates a tantalizing set of investigative questions. For instance, could she be intentionally eschewing a particularly important component in her development as a songwriter? If so, what specifically might she be avoiding or denying or forgetting? And why? This chapter will tackle these questions through a quasi-literary/legal method of investigation to trace a process of gathering evidence with which one can answer the question 'Is Joni Mitchell "guilty" of using Beat writers – and Jack Kerouac in particular – as an aesthetic influence?' The use of the term *guilt* here strongly implies her alleged cognizance of the act of using Kerouac in her artistic production, and thus the answer to this key question lies in a search for the most compelling evidence possible *directly* linking her art to Beat/Kerouac art. In other words, the case 1) rejects any claim that Mitchell unconsciously absorbed and synthesized Kerouac's work into her own, since such a claim, while true to some degree of all human cognition, is fundamentally unverifiable, and 2) is aimed at the evidentiary standard of Beyond a Reasonable Doubt, used in criminal cases, rather than the Preponderance of Evidence or More than 50 Per cent (or a Single Grain of Sand), which is required in most civil cases.

That being said, a logical first step is to collect and assess whatever evidence is readily available on the topic, exculpatory, that is, in Mitchell's favour, and inculpatory, that is, not in Mitchell's favour. Doing so reveals, first, that Mitchell herself, despite her public acknowledgement of aesthetic influences, struggled to avoid influences altogether, de facto including Beat writers, as she told Jody Denberg in a 1998 interview for KGSR-FM out of Austin, Texas, 'all the time I'm trying to be un-influenced by anything including myself, not to steal from myself', crediting her invention of tunings as the vehicle by which she forced herself to make new discoveries. Second, again contrary to Mitchell's declarations, literary critics, those providing expert testimony, have repeatedly found that her lyrics, philosophies, spiritual practices and other characteristics echo simpatico with the Beat writing. For instance, Simon Warner, editor of this volume, rightly identifies Mitchell as a singer-performer whose engagement with multiple media, a confessional approach, an immersion in jazz production and performance, and 'her concern with the existential lure of movement' place her 'in a Beat framework' (2013, pp. 159–62). Laurence Coupe links her philosophically to Gary Snyder as an environmental prophet (2007, p. 174), which makes sense when one considers her iconic 'Big Yellow Taxi' and 'Woodstock'.

Miles Parks Grier interprets her image on the cover of *Hejira* (1976) – Mitchell with cigarette and black beret – as a 'bebop-inspired Beat [poet], on the road like Jack Kerouac'. However, Kerouac never wore a beret, a Euro-beatnik image transformed into a mass culture trope for the Beats.[1] More to the point, however, Grier amplifies the Kerouac–Mitchell connection with respect to race, concluding that 'she shared their wanderlust, anti-establishment cynicism, and deep investing in jazz music and black people as reservoirs of the physicality and spontaneity that white people lost as they traded manual labor and rural or urban community life for intellectual labor and suburban isolation' (2012, p. 9). Lloyd Whitesell, in *The Music of Joni Mitchell*, a

scrupulously detailed interdisciplinary analysis of Mitchell's poetry and music, also sees a Kerouac connection in Mitchell's 'The Boho Dance' (*Hissing of Summer Lawns*): 'The wild rebel figure of earlier songs appears here in muted form as the second-person addressee, the "subterranean" in the parking lot (a reference to the Beat ethos by way of Kerouac's novel *The Subterraneans*)' (2008, p. 94). Interestingly, the wording of Whitesell's claim implies that it is evidence-based, but he provides no evidence, leaving the provenance of Mitchell's use of the word ('Subterranean by your own design'; 1997, p. 146) most likely to a broader cultural association. We also have an indirect link mediated by Allen Ginsberg, who as 'friend of the late Jack Kerouac' (according to Katharine Monk in *Joni: The Creative Odyssey of Joni Mitchell*), while on Bob Dylan's 1975 Rolling Thunder Revue, would frequently mention Chogyam Trunpga Rinpoche (2012, p. 159), founder of Naropa University in 1974 and Mitchell's Buddhist teacher who inspired her song 'Refuge of the Road'.[2]

The urge to link Mitchell specifically with Jack Kerouac, as do Grier, Monk and Whitesell, takes on added appeal when one considers that she has had important relationships with individuals who were significantly influenced by Kerouac's art, including Dylan and Leonard Cohen, both of whom she has identified as 'points of departure' for her art (Wild, 1991). She performed with Dylan on his 1975 Revue, but Leonard Cohen, with whom she had a brief but intense affair, was most likely the most influential. Cohen was nine years her senior and already a published poet and novelist when they first met, in 1963. Cohen, described as 'more of a leftover beatnik than a hippie' (Weller, 2008, p. 242), played the role of a mild-mannered Svengali or Professor Higgins, schooling Mitchell in the humanities. 'He gave me his reading list,' she told singer Malka Marom, 'wonderful books: Camus, *The Stranger*; the *I Ching*, which I've used all my life; *Magister Ludi*; *Siddhartha* [the last two by Herman Hesse]. A wonderful reading list' (2014, p. 36). Cohen has openly acknowledged his lyrical indebtedness to Kerouac's jazzy-accompanied readings of 'Deadbelly' and 'Charlie Parker', and perhaps a Kerouac novel was on a list that he gave Mitchell. Whether she read Kerouac and other Beat writers because of Cohen, we don't know, but she clearly knew enough about them to associate Kerouac with the jazz/Beat period when she was in high school – 'I was the school artist, and so I'd be given projects . . . Frequently, I was paid in jazz records because that was the beatnik Kerouac period' (McIntyre, 2001) – and to consistently throughout her life distance herself from them.

Interestingly, her connection to Bob Dylan and thus possibly to Kerouac has emerged recently at the much broader level of genre in the Nobel Prize organization's assertion that literature and popular song lyrics can indeed be of the same mettle, not a new insight by any means but still a somewhat controversial matter, as illustrated by the Nobel presentation speech recognizing Bob Dylan as the recipient of the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature. 'In a distant past, all poetry was sung or tunefully recited, poets were rhapsodes, bards, troubadours; "lyrics" comes from "lyre",' declared Horace Engdahl, a Swedish historian and literary critic, his words constituting a truism that long guided Beat poetics, particularly that of Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg in their

efforts to rescue the literary arts from the sterility of the academic page.[3] Directly explicating Dylan's contribution to humane letters, Engdahl announced that Dylan had 'changed our idea of what poetry can be and how it can work . . . [and] [i]f people in the literary world groan, one must remind them that the gods don't write, they dance and they sing'. Mitchell herself, in a 1991 interview for *Rolling Stone*, explicitly credited Dylan's 'Positively Fourth Street' – his ambiguous, accusatory and narrative-driven hit single – with her move into complex literary modes: 'I realized that this was a whole new ballgame; now you could make your songs literature. The potential for the song had never occurred to me . . . But it [had] occurred to Dylan . . . And I began to write. So Dylan sparked me' (Wild, 1991).

Music and literary critics recognized this spark early on in Mitchell's career, evidenced, for example, by Homer Hogan's *Poetry of Relevance* (1970), a conventional high school English textbook featuring as poetry the lyrics of the Beatles, Jim Morrison and Mitchell. Hogan praised Mitchell's ability to manage both melody and words; explicated her lyrics as poetry with respect to attitude, manner, style, thought, description/narration and representation; and paired selected Mitchell lyrics with poems by authors including Amy Lowell, William Wordsworth, William Blake and John Keats.[4] Treated as poetry itself, then, Mitchell's song lyrics are ripe for connection to not only an impressive line of American-British modernist/Romantic poets, as Hogan illustrates, but also to other possible precursor literary giants such as Kerouac.

Nonetheless, this assemblage of extant treatment of a Kerouac-Mitchell connection alone does not serve as prima facie evidence, that is, evidence that on the face of it proves 'guilt' or 'innocence'. None of the expert testimony comes from exhaustive textual analysis, not even Hogan's, and the remainder in conjunction with the former constitutes at best circumstantial or indirect evidence requiring inferences to form connections between and among them. For instance, one can deduce that Mitchell was influenced (or may have been) by Kerouac. One might also infer that Mitchell was influenced by Ginsberg and Snyder or by only Cohen and Dylan or by Walt Whitman or William Wordsworth or Emily Dickinson or Rinpoche for that matter.

However, Mitchell's 'guilt' as a plausible finding becomes more realistic when one takes seriously the substantial list of topoi that her lyrics share with Kerouac's prose and poetry, ambivalence toward their own race, as Grier suggests, being but one of these. What follows is by no means comprehensive, and some are aesthetically more substantial than others: Travel, Confession, Freedom, Anti-Materialism, Low Art/High Art Fusion, Jazz, Spontaneous/Improvisational Composition Method, Voice of Wisdom and Prophesy, Sexuality/Gender, Love, the Natural World, Bums/the Dispossessed, Nietzsche, Buddhism, Dreams, Native Americans, Painting, Canadian Heritage, Race and Love of Cats. Exploration of these as grounds of consubstantiality could prove fruitful. For instance, studying Mitchell's song lyrics to discern her approach to Buddhism, to which she was introduced in art school (Marom, 2014, p. 155), and Kerouac's, which he initially learned about through reading Dwight

Goddard's *The Buddhist Bible* in the early 1950s, might reveal commonalities and/or innovations in American translations and adaptions of Buddhist texts and practices.

Likewise, a study of the voice of wisdom and prophecy, itself associated with the topoi of Buddhism, could build on moments when a reader hears echoes, albeit faint, of Kerouac's Shakespearean-New Testament modulated speech in a Mitchell lyric, as one might with this passage from Kerouac's *Doctor Sax*: 'Beef is going into Eternity at his end without me – my end is as far from his as eternity – Eternity hears hollow voices in a rock? Eternity hears ordinary voices in the parlor. On a bone the ant descends' (1959, p. 105), and this excerpt from Mitchell's 'Hejira': 'We all come and go unknown / Each so deep and superficial / Between the forceps and the stone' (1998, p. 164). Similarly, Mitchell's use of serpent and bird imagery in lyrics such as 'Don Juan's Reckless Daughter' and 'Snakes and Ladders', eerily similar to Kerouac's Great Snake of the World in *On the Road* and *Doctor Sax*, could serve as a foundation for an archetypal and Gnostic element unifying the two artists' linguistic representations of themselves and American post-World War II culture – all held together by the contrapuntal movement of the pair, Kerouac's voice driving relentlessly away from the semantic and narratival into music toward an escape from sound altogether as we see in *Old Angel Midnight* and *Mexico City Blues*, Mitchell's moving away from folksy ballad melodies toward longer, more syntactically complex linguistic and narratival constructions, such as those on *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* and 'The Reoccurring Dream' (a multi-vocal song that she has described as more 'textual' than melodic (Denberg, 1998)) from the later *Chalkmark in a Rain Storm* (1988). Finally, such studies grounded in close readings can lead to the topic of composition style, both artists employing idiosyncratic jazz-based improvisational methods. Mitchell, for instance, told Malka Maron in a 2012 interview that her, Mitchell's, composing process 'coming out of *Hejira*' was like 'improvising around a melody that only I knew' (2014, p. 155), something akin to Kerouac's method which featured a procedure that he described as 'undisturbed flow from the mind of personal secret idea-words, blowing (as per jazz musician) on subject of image' (Charters, 1995, p. 484). Both are on record comparing their composition process to painting/sketching with words.

Taking Grier's lead, one might also pursue a fuller exploration of race as it intersects with sex and gender. This research could pair Kerouac's desire to be African American 1) expressed through Sal Paradise's desire to be 'a Negro, feeling that the best the white world had offered was not enough ecstasy for [him]' (1979, p. 180) and 2) his novel *Pic* (1971) narrated by a young black boy, with Mitchell's long-time involvement with black musicians, leading to her strong self-identification as black and her performative transformation into the black male hipster Art Nouveau, who appears on the cover of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*. Both can also be analysed around the controversy created by the 2017 publication, in the venerable feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia*, of an essay by Rebecca Tuvel arguing that transracial can be considered as viable as transgender.[5] Following Zadie Smith's non-judgemental discovery of Mitchell's 'black period', such a study could also seek to move beyond superficial unease and

embarrassment, even outrage, at white ambivalence toward whiteness itself – much of which constitutes the current political climate – revealing instead the subterranean realities of complex racialized identities (2012, p. 35).

Along this same line, and this is not insignificant, one can infer that Mitchell and the Beats/Kerouac co-existed at a time dominated by a particular cultural discourse in the West, a fairly simple case to make based on a substantial body of American literary and cultural history. Topoi such as many of those listed above signify not only salient features of twentieth-century American counterculture but also the very bedrock of American identity against which *and along with* Americans have always negotiated – and which have influenced Canadian cultures for centuries as well. One can even go so far as to liken the comparative evidence to the analogical recognition that 1) humans share approximately 60 percent of the same genes with the tomato and 2) individuals of European descent can trace themselves genetically back to seven females[6] – meaning that convincing evidence of distinction is instead a marker of the mundane, a revelation that a comparison of Kerouac and Mitchell *flattens and democratizes* rather than separates and distinguishes.

Further refinement of and attention to these topoi, and others, might prove useful case studies to Beat Studies, American Studies, North American Historical and Cultural Studies, Popular Culture Studies and others. But even so, generating new evidence through such comparative analyses, while portending valuable cultural insights as well as new visions of both artists, again serves as circumstantial/indirect evidence. These potential studies, without access to archival data, do not resolve a question of direct influence.

It appears then that we are left with a mystery that one can resolve at best through 'a death by a thousand cuts', meaning that the most likely solution is based not on confessions or unassailable direct evidence such as eye witness testimony (e.g., 'I saw Mitchell composing a song using Kerouac's poetry as a template') but on a barrage of circumstantial inculpatory evidence, that which the literary critic Ihab Hassan called 'facile claim[s]' (1955, p. 66). If an investigator assembles enough of such material, one may be convinced by at least a preponderance of evidence and perhaps to even beyond-a-reasonable-doubt – in other words, each facile claim in the context of more and more such claims exponentially accrues strength and credibility – that Mitchell, for reasons that remain a mystery, is 'guilty' of denying a credible and direct aesthetic association to Jack Kerouac, no matter how flat and mundane that may be. Case closed.

This is where many an investigator might leave it. But when one looks for the kind of evidence, whether direct or indirect, that would have the *greatest* chance of standing up in court, a high bar for which even the literary sleuth might strive, the case for a Kerouac–Mitchell connection begins to unravel. We have yet to find that lost photograph of Mitchell reading *On the Road*, a twin of the one of Jackie Kennedy reading *The Dharma Bums* or Marilyn Monroe reading James Joyce's *Ulysses*. We have

no interviews or letters in which she remarks on the importance of reading his novels, nothing such as her statement that 'Both Sides Now' was influenced by Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*.[7] No detailed patterns in her lyrics of appropriated Kerouacian language, analogous to Kerouac's long poem 'Sea' that concludes *Big Sur* as homage to Joyce's 'Proteus' episode in *Ulysses*. No specific references to Kerouac in her lyrics, such as those in LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's 'In Memory of Radio': 'Who has ever stopped to think of the divinity of Lamont Cranston / (Only Jack Kerouac, that I know of: & me' (Charters, 1992, p. 340). No notes on composition methods connecting her improvisational methods to his spontaneous prose. No copy of *On the Road* with her annotations. No tattered postcard to an art school chum saying that she's 'got to find herself like Jack' and signed with a big wobbly heart and smiley face. No images or stories of them meeting, hanging out – a young lithesome Mitchell, born in 1943, sitting starry-eyed beside the aging Kerouac, 21 years her senior and an American pop culture icon when she was still in high school in Saskatoon. No eyewitness accounts of anything explicitly Kerouacian. And note that even if such direct evidence existed it must be treated with great care and efforts to corroborate since decades of scientific research have shown that eyewitness testimony is often unreliable. In the same vein, research in psychology and neuroscience over the decades has found human memory to be fallible, in effect undermining Mitchell's own memories about the importance to her art of individuals such as Cohen and Dylan.[8]

We do have photographs of Mitchell with Allen Ginsberg on the Rolling Thunder tour;[9] an interview in which Anne Waldman states that Mitchell gave her a dulcimer to accompany her poetry on that same tour (Billotte, 1976); Ginsberg's 29 June 1976 letter to Bob Dylan and 'composed also is for eye of Joni Mitchell', requesting money to support the founding of the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics (2008, p. 387); and a statement from the Canadian poet Fred Wah remembering Mitchell attending a Vancouver party in 1963 to meet Allen Ginsberg (Sornberger, 2013, p. 182). So with respect to the Beats as a coterie, we have a modicum of forensic evidence (the photographs at the 'crime' scene, so to speak) and direct evidence from at least two self-identified Beat writers, Ginsberg and Waldman, alluding to some kind of connection to (Ginsberg) or relationship with (Waldman) Mitchell, and one eyewitness statement (Wah). But with respect to Kerouac, we are left with no oral testimony, no witness statements, no tangible evidence, no forensic evidence, no documentary evidence – and not even hearsay evidence.

Add the fact that each worked in different media and the 'guilty' resolution becomes less viable. First it must be acknowledged that Kerouac never considered himself a musician and despite the fact that he informally studied jazz and later in life read his works to jazz accompaniment (the most famous being his reading from *Visions of Cody*, masked as *On the Road*, to Steve Allen's jazz piano in 1959 on *The Steve Allen Show*), he was by no means a singer, songwriter or instrumentalist.[10] Likewise and conversely, Mitchell long considered herself a painter before she began writing song lyrics, language intended to work as companion to music itself. In fact, she has stated

that she frequently writes the music first and then constructs 'three sets of lyrics before [she's] satisfied' (Whitesell, 2008, p. 41), fundamentally the opposite of Kerouac's spontaneous method, to which only a small portion had music added much later as a secondary or cosmetic feature.

Then too – despite the worthy claims made by Horace Engdahl – the musicality of literary language is not identical to the musicality of the sound that comes from, say, a saxophone, a guitar or a human voice. Musical harmony is the simultaneous occurrence of tones and pitches written as chords in vertical form denoting simultaneous production of multiple sounds – and performed as such. Literary harmony, however, exists in de facto linearity as words or letters moving horizontally, vertically or diagonally across a page, the pleasing nature (i.e., harmony) of various sounds assembled, if at all, in the reader's mental transcription and translation of the written text – the sounds never occur simultaneously. Similarly, that which we recognize as a literary composition appears *and is* distinctly different from a musical composition. Even when an author such as Kerouac intentionally uses musical forms and concertedly moves literary discourse away from the semantic and toward pure sound itself, the product is distinctly different from a conventional musical score.[11] For instance, Kerouac's musical method of creating *Mexico City Blues* with recurring rhythms and phrases and 'the linking of sound units from line to line and chorus to chorus' (Grace, 2007, p. 164) ultimately produces the language of lyric poems, just as do his efforts to create poetic discourse that looks like words being sung or meant to be sung – as in these cases: 'Of o cean wave' and 'Ra diance!' (*Book of Blues*, pp. 98, 99) as well as 'A–mer–ri–kay' and 'ho / o / ome' (*Book of Blues*, 34th and 38th choruses from 'San Francisco Blues'). These are clearly not musical scores, no matter the extent to which he intentionally manipulated features of musical composition.

As John Leland, author of *Why Kerouac Matters: The Lessons of On The Road*, concluded in 2001, '[a]s poems, even good song lyrics often feel beholden to easy rhymes or predictable formulas. Taken out of [their musical] context, these songwriting conventions often feel exposed and mannered. Music is a soft lyric's best friend, and a lot of verses . . . can use the companionship.'[12] As for poetry succeeding as music, Benjamin Lempert argues in an essay on the jazz poetics of Langston Hughes and Charles Olson that 'the "dream" of a written poem's literally being a mode of music remains forever "deferred", and why the idealized overcoming of the divide separating poetry from music remains unrealizable in the poem' (p. 310). Perhaps, we may infer, the divide remains concretized in the musical lyric as well. Therefore, yes, Mitchell's lyrics can be (and have been) read as poetry, Whitesell's being the most convincing analysis available, but does that mean that Kerouac's prosody is a distinct and aesthetically significant influence on Mitchell's prosody/songwriting? Not directly, by any means. Ultimately, the links between Kerouac's and Mitchell's media prove vexing, rendering it a challenge for a critic to convincingly identify a direct or even indirect (i.e. via Cohen and Dylan) Kerouacian heritage in Mitchell's oeuvre. At this point, even the most amateur of detectives faces the fact that to date the evidentiary

ledger stands as a glass half empty rather than one half full: A correlation can be argued but not cause and effect. Mitchell is found not guilty: case closed. Or perhaps we have a hung jury.

All that being said, if this were a real-life police procedure, one dependent on using the law to resolve the matter rather than the homespun genius of a Miss Marple or the Oxford-based superiority of a Lord Peter Wimsey, one ought to have already identified the relevant law(s), along with key terms and their definitions in said legislation, as well as how courts have interpreted them. None of which we have done up to this point, since in the world of literature and the arts, there is no set of laws governing how artists are to create, the materials they can use and the processes with which they use them, other than laws of copyright and trademark. In fact, Helmut K. Anheier and Jiigen Gerhards, in an esoteric yet informative quantitative study of late twentieth-century German authors' opinions on influence, astutely recognize that '[m]odern literature lacks universal criteria for evaluating and identifying art'. While the Zeitgeist demands 'innovations, originality, and breach of tradition', Western writers find themselves in what Anheier and Gerhards call 'a position of aesthetic uncertainty [which] may be reduced by using other writers as reference points . . .' (1991, pp. 139–40). It is this concept of *influence*, then, a more capacious term than 'reference point', that stands as an aesthetic substitute for the rule of law.[13] It is to that point that the Kerouac-Mitchell investigation must turn for a restart or redirection. Without doing so, any assemblage of evidence linking Mitchell directly to Kerouac inevitably floats away unattached, as we have already seen with our compilation of indirect evidence.

Influence, however, proves complicated, as is often the case with legal language and other forms of discourse. A basic dictionary definition may seem straightforward: 'The capacity to have an effect on the character, development, or behaviour of someone or something, or the effect itself.' But when one turns to the use of the term in literary critical discourse, questions and contradictions arise. For instance, in *The Dictionary of Literary Influences, 1914–2000* (2004), a standard reference tool published by Greenwood Press, editor John Powell uses a broad brush, defining *influence* as '[t]he relationship between [one's] achievements and [one's] reading' (p. xv). It can also mean the relation between a writer and other writers, the relation between a writer and traditions or the relation between a writer and a metaphysical muse. It can be, and has often been, confused with inspiration, as the charming list in Ihab Hassan's still astute 1955 essay on influence attests, Hassan noting mores, climate, locale, historical events (e.g., the Black Death), literary genres and others, along with forms denoting influence, such as forgeries and borrowings (pp. 66–7). Influence can be interpreted as positive, or, as in the case of Oscar Wilde's literary presentation of it in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, an immoral act whereby one loses one's very soul (Wilde, p. xx). Some, such as Hassan, find the term extremely ambiguous, 'called upon to account for any relationship, running the gamut of incidence to causality, with a somewhat expansive range of intermediate correlations' (1955, p. 67). He rightly concludes that to do influence justice one must follow a procedure something along

the lines of Friedrich Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, a process so rigorous that to make the study of influence at all viable one should instead concentrate on *tradition* and *development*.

The most widely recognized treatment of influence, however, is Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*, which, odd as it may sound to some twenty-first-century readers, proves most useful in an investigation into Mitchell's relationship to Beat poetics. Bloom tackles the matter in terms of the impact of a strong poet, one of genius, on the development of a younger strong poet. *Influence* for Bloom is the act of *misinterpretation* on the part of the younger poet, albeit a necessary act that creates imaginative space for poets to assert their own unique identities to counter obliteration as a poet (2003, pp. 5, 71). The process results in 'anxiety and self-serving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist' (p. 30). Loosely applying a Freudian, or family romance, perspective, Bloom identifies six types of misrepresentation: a deliberate misrepresentation or corrective of a precursor (clinamen or swerve); complete and antithesis (tessera) in which the poet 'antithetically "completes" his precursor' (p. 14); a deliberate break with the precursor (kenosis); counter-sublime to the precursor (daemonization); purgation and solipsism (askesis); and a final 'return of the dead' (apophrades), in which the younger poet seems to have been able to write the precursor's work, that is, erasing the precursor historically and aesthetically. Bloom sought to create a method for effectively reading the work of one genius through the lens of another genius's work, or the younger poem as a 'deliberate misrepresentation' of the precursor poem. Doing so, he contends, is more productive than merely reading a single poem as a decontextualized, solitary unit. He disassociates his definition of influence both from non- poetical forces and from what he called 'the transmission of ideas and images from earlier to later poets, [to] the history of ideas ... the wearisome industry of source-hunting, of allusion-counting', about which, ironically, this investigation up to this point has been most concerned.[14]

In accordance with Bloom's paradigm, then, one can say that weaker, more mundane poets are those who allow themselves to become vessels of mechanical imitation, rather than using the contentious relationship to transform the precursor's work. Bloom's paradigm is not without its faults (his misogynist Oedipal father–son perspective being the most obvious), but as a tool of linguistic definition and application, the closest one can come to a legal principle, it takes our investigation in a, perhaps surprisingly, more fruitful direction with respect to Mitchell's own statements about the issue.

So we once again return to her own language about Beat writers, the quoted passages that introduce this chapter:

> 1. That whole pocket of modern art is my least favorite in art history. I was kind of a Dadaist to the Beats in a certain way. Musically, they annoyed me. In painting, they annoyed me, and I made no bones about it.

2. I never was an anarchist. Never. No, that's probably why I don't like [the Beats]. You need rules and regulations, but you need just ones.

3. I wasn't a fan of the Beats. I didn't like to see the underbelly revered. I figured it had its place, but I didn't want to be an imitator of it. I'm not a book burner but I longed for something more wholesome. God knows why I longed for the impossible. In high school I did a lot of satire on the Beats and on abstraction.

It is language that frankly denotes knowledge of Beat writers as precursors of a great enough magnitude that she, early on also heralded as an artist of great magnitude, positions herself in opposition to them. There is a relationship with them, Kerouac implicitly included under the term *Beat*, which she directly acknowledges. Most vehemently, she identifies herself as a Dadaist, a fascinating descriptor that despite Tristan Tzara's claim that the word had no meaning is also, according to his own words, amongst others, destructive action, including the destruction of logic, good manners and social hierarchy. Mitchell then claims that she used the Beats as fodder (my language, not hers) for satire out of her desire for a more wholesome view of the world. Her statements project an anxiety of influence that led her art in its earliest stages away from the Beat vortex rather than in alignment with or imitation of Beat writers, and one can argue that the force with which she expresses her opposition to Beat poetics suggests that it seriously threatened her vision of herself as an original artist, whether poet, painter, musician or songwriter. Perhaps she consciously or unconsciously feared the kind of influence Oscar Wilde wrote about, the possibility of losing one's entire self to the viral possession of past literary genius.

By applying Bloom's theory of misrepresentation to Mitchell's own claims regarding Beat influence, we find three categories that seem most appropriate to this case: the swerve, antithesis and completion, and discontinuity. While Bloom's theory suggests that the young strong poet will take one over the other five, he doesn't discount a combination of tactics, which is what we find in our investigation of Mitchell.

Swerve

The swerve is the foundational move of the anxiety of influence, the moment when the younger poet recognizes that she must move away from the precursor, exactly what Mitchell remembers she did as a teenager. Granted, her teenage satire is likely not the mature work of the younger poet, but it might stand as evidence that even at an early age, for her, Beat writing was significant enough in popular culture that she used it to practise and develop her own art as a swerve away from Beat poetics. Additional markers of this swerve are her statements about the nature of Beat writing as both anarchistic and a revelation of the cultural underbelly, neither an entirely inaccurate representation but a misrepresentation of Beat writing overall. Interestingly, Mitchell might have come to understand, at least during the 1975 Thunder tour, the

broad and deep complexities of Beat discourse, including its beatific elements, which Kerouac as well as Ginsberg emphasized – enough to recalibrate her representation of them. But she did not, instead, still repeating 50-some years later a 'beatnik' vision of Beat Generation writers as a cultural abomination.

Antithetical completion

Bloom contends that poets of antithetical completion consider themselves to be a 'completing link' and that they must persuade themselves and their readers that as a poet the precursor's work must be 'fulfilled and enlarged' (p. 67). The young poet travels an oppositional path, all the time working to complete the precursor's work by making it something larger, more whole. With Mitchell, one can say that her desire for wholesomeness is a statement of belief that the anarchistic Beat focus on the cultural underbelly was but a small piece of a superior poetic reality and that poems complete that artifice instigated by the antithetical turn to wholesomeness along with just rules and regulations.

Discontinuity

Bloom argued that '"[u]ndoing" the precursor's strength in *oneself* serves also to "isolate" the self from the precursor's stance' while appearing to eradicate the younger one's own '"divinity" as well' (pp. 90–1). In other words, the young poet must strip the precursor of their power through self-abnegation that further distances the younger from the precursor. With Mitchell, her identification as Dadaist opposition may be the most explicit evidence of this kind of anxiety of influence. As a Dadaist, she tears down everything that Beat writers have created, refusing to be an imitator, but she also undermines her own poetic process by associating herself with a movement that declared itself essentially nihilistic in nature, if not at least anarchistic, which she denied. An additional marker of discontinuity is Mitchell's declaration that she was seeking wholesomeness, the opposite of the Beat 'underbelly', yet admitting that she was seeking the impossible, a linguistic manoeuvre that empties her work of Beat influence, while she separates herself from their poetic power through her admission that what she sought was impossible. In other words, in opposition she situates herself as a force significantly strong enough to destroy them, but her identity as poet remains tied to Beat prosody; consequently, she must empty herself of that oppositional identity to some degree in order to create her own imaginative space.

Textual evidence of Mitchell's anxiety of influence – a brief discussion

Examples of lyrics that transparently appear to represent Mitchell's swerve are 'Both Sides Now', 'Chelsea Morning', 'Big Yellow Taxi', 'Michael From Mountains' and

'Woodstock', all five of which counter the anarchistic, 'underbelly' focus of Beat texts such as John Clellon Holmes's *Go*, William S. Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, Ginsberg's 'Howl' and even Kerouac's *On the Road* – texts emphasizing in various ways the hidden reality of America's dispossessed. However, since we don't know which specific Beat works Mitchell might have read, in order to pursue a Bloomian overture of textual evidence to demonstrate the reading of her poems as manifestations of her anxiety of influence, we'll take as an example the most obvious possibility, Kerouac's *On the Road*, looking specifically at the conclusion, that famous paragraph in which Sal Paradise declares that God is Pooh Bear before rhapsodizing about memory and the night:

> The evening star must be dropping and shedding her sparkler dims on the prairie, which is just before the coming of complete night that blesses the earth, darkens all rivers, cups the peaks and folds the final shore in, and nobody, nobody knows what's going to happen to anybody besides the forlorn rags of growing old, I think of Dean Moriarty, I even think of Old Dean Moriarty, the father we never found, I think of Dean Moriarty.
>
> (pp. 309–10)

Kerouac, at the peak of his literary powers, concludes the travels of his protagonist, Sal, which have led him ultimately into what he calls the fellaheen world of Mexico, a world seemingly void of authoritative structure in which he achieves ecstasy and self-reliance sufficient enough to allow him to return home where he settles down and marries the girl of his dreams. Sal's search for the indefinable 'It' has led him back to acquiescence in a world predicated on a mélange of just and unjust laws and regulations, to a version of 'wholesomeness' defined as heterosexual marriage. In that move, Sal has also gained knowledge about himself and others, the futility of human progress, the power of love and ultimately death, the only certainty a fellow human can rely on, as conveyed through his elegiac memory of his spiritual guide, Dean Moriarty. It is a beatific vision that situates freedom of the self in an unnamed transcendent space, leaving the material self in a state of semi-servitude and mourning.

In contrast, Mitchell, at the peak of her powers one can argue in her jazz-inspired 'Paprika Plains' (which fills the second side of *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*), achieves an antithetical completion of Kerouac. Whereas Sal has to leave the comfort of his aunt's home for the hardships of the road and working-class life before returning home to gift his reader with a bleak vision of all-encompassing night and old age, Mitchell's first-person narrator leaves a grungy bar scene to take a transcendental space odyssey over the American plains, through history and without time, the self a floating Emersonian eye guiding the speaker/singer to slash her vision of the earth from 'space probe photographs' so that she can return to the bar of her departure, to a place of material certitude and human connection, her voice ecstatic as it anticipates her reunion with a nameless 'you':

As I'm coming through the door
I'm coming back
I'm coming back for more!
The band plugs in again
You see that mirrored ball begin to sputter lights
And spin
Dizzy on the dancers
Geared to changing rhythms
No matter what you do
I'm floating back
I'm floating back to you!

(1997, pp. 185–6)

A similar antithetical completion, conjoined with discontinuity, concludes 'Don Juan's Reckless Daughter', a poem that in its use of the symbol of the snake echoes that same archetypal trope in Kerouac's *Doctor Sax*, as we noted earlier. The speaker/singer repeats a Sal Paradise vision of bleakness – 'We are all hopelessly oppressed cowards / Of some duality / Of restless multiplicity' – but then erases that position in the final stanza: '*The spirit talks in spectrums* / He talks to mother earth to father sky / Self indulgence to self denial / Man to woman / Scales to feathers / You and I' (1997, pp. 192–3, emphasis mine). In effect, the poem empties itself of Kerouac and of Mitchell herself – the hallmarks of discontinuity – by first freely imitating the Kerouacian vision but then negating both it and her use of it by expanding – the antithetical completion – Kerouac's solipsistic dualism of the self and the ocean of night into the unity of the spectrum, a transcendental spirit world encompassing the 'You and I'.

Resolution of the case?

When I began this investigation, I was convinced that I might well have to conclude that the question of Mitchell's guilt or innocence relative to Kerouac as an influence was at its deepest level meant to discredit Mitchell's originality, a swerve of its own rooted in a kind of critical misogynistic anxiety of influence. That may well be true. But as the investigation gained momentum, the volume of circumstantial evidence persistently led me to think that the best 'Detecting Jack Kerouac and Joni Mitchell' could do was to find that Mitchell belongs in the Beat lineage, the lines of creation that inevitably exist in tombs and tangles that rarely see the light of day. Lineage is something that one recognizes and acknowledges, or it can be recognized by a second or third party, such as a literary critic or historian. The complex body of work created by Beat writers descends from a number of lineages, including British-American Romanticism; European-American modernism; European surrealism, Dadism and

vorticism; Western cinema; Eastern religious traditions and practices; Judeo-Christian theology; world folklore, and others. Mitchell's lyrics fit relatively smoothly into these, as well as others, so I maintain that the lineage argument is accurate. Yes, to the extent possible as a branch on a tree of descent presses forward in time, Joni Mitchell was influenced by Jack Kerouac, however minimal that use or appropriation might be – and bearing in mind that the 'Jack Kerouac' who influenced her may be a phantom conjured by the readers and audience of Mitchell's lyrics or a hybrid composite of authors of American wisdom literature, a Kerouac far removed from the flesh and bone writer who introduced America to the Beat Generation. In this respect, then, Joni Mitchell is exonerated.

However, when I turned the investigative lens of Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence toward Mitchell, the possibility of a genuine, direct Beat influence became more plausible. Mitchell's dogged denials of such a connection took on enhanced meaning, projecting an anxiety of influence. We're still left with little direct connection between Mitchell and Kerouac, but at least critical readers now have a viable starting point from which to legitimately examine Mitchell's work as *poetic misrepresentation*, or *misprision* as Bloom called it, of various Beat texts. The above brief discussion of *On the Road* and *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* is just the beginning . . .

And one must remember, the search for literary influence has no statute of limitations: direct evidence may appear 50 years hence leading the Kerouac-Mitchell scholar-detective to declare without a reasonable doubt a definitive connection.

The case remains open.

Notes

1. This derogatory rebranding took place not only through San Francisco columnist Herb Caen's use of the term beatnik but also through Fred Macdarrah's Rent-A-Beatnik parties in the late 1950s and early 1960s contemporaneously with the dim-witted beatnik Maynard G. Krebs in the sitcom *The Many Loves of Doby Gillis*.
2. Researchers may easily come upon Carl Wilson's review of Monk's book for the *Literary Review of Canada* in 2013 in which he claims that Monk stated that Kerouac had been on the Revue tour: 'The book is based entirely on previous press coverage, so anyone who has followed Mitchell over the years will find much . . . of it familiar – and, in places, inaccurate. For example, Monk says that Mitchell had a Buddhist teacher recommended to her by Jack Kerouac during Dylan's Rolling Thunder Revue tour in 1975, when Kerouac had been dead for six years; Monk probably means Allen Ginsberg, who was on the tour' (http://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2013/01/an-awkward-original/; accessed 17 March 2017). Monk, in fact, knew that it was Ginsberg and stated as much in her book. Wilson's claim appears to be an egregious misreading.
3. See my essay 'The Beats and Literary History: Myths and Realities' in the *Cambridge Companion to the Beats* (2017) for a discussion of how Beat writers often denied the importance of academic writing and education in the development of their art.
4. http://www.jonimitchell.com/Library/view.cfm?id=3349 (accessed 17 March 2017).

5. See 'In Defense of Transracialism' by Rebecca Tuvel, *Hypatia* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2017): 263–78. Grier's essay 'The Only Black Man at the Party: Joni Mitchell Enters the Rock Canon' for *Genders Online Journal* is an excellent starting point, in conjunction with Kevin Fellezs's 'Gender, Race, and the Ma(s)king of "Joni Mitchell"' in the *Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter.*
6. See *The Seven Daughters of Eve* (2002) by geneticist Brian Sykes.
7. Mitchell told Gene Shay in his 1967 interview with her that she'd been 'reading a book, and I [hadn't] finished it yet, called *Henderson the Rain King* [by Saul Bellow]. And there's a line in it that I especially got hung up on that was about when he was flying to Africa and searching for something, he said that in an age when people could look up and down at clouds, they shouldn't be afraid to die. And so I got this idea "from both sides now". There are a lot of sides to everything, and so the song is called "From Both Sides, Now".'
8. Research on these topics is extremely extensive, but see, for example, as a good starting point https://www.innocenceproject.org/science-behind-eyewitness-identification-reform/ (accessed 17 March 2017).
9. http://ginsbergblog.blogspot.com/2014/09/joni-mitchell.html (accessed 17 March 2017).
10. For an extended discussion of Kerouac's mass media fame, see Ronna Johnson's '"You're putting me on": Jack Kerouac and the Postmodern Emergence', in *Reconstructing the Beats*, edited by Jennie Skerl.
11. See my chapter 'Songs and Prayers' in *Jack Kerouac and the Literary Imagination* for additional examples and discussion of this phenomenon.
12. http:jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=651 (accessed 17 March 2017).
13. Anheiser and Herhard's major finding was that 'the denial/absence of acknowledged influence is found among writers who are excluded from the professional networks where reputations are made in the world of literature' (p. 137), a contradiction to the general consensus regarding Anglo-American writers and influence.
14. He also expressed antipathy toward what we now call digital humanities: 'an industry that will soon touch apocalypse anyway when it passes from scholars to computers' (p. 31).

Bibliography

Anheier, H. K. and J. Gerhards, 'Acknowledgment of Literary Influence: A Structural Analysis of a German Literary Network', *Sociological Forum* 6, no. 1 (1991): 137–56.

Belletto, S. (ed.), 'The Beats in Literary History: Myths and Realities', in *Cambridge Companion to the Beats*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 62–76.

Billotte, L., *Berkeley Barb*, 17–23 September 1976, p. 11.

Bloom, H., *The Anxiety of Influence*, New York: Oxford, 1973.

Charters, A. (ed.), *The Portable Beat Reader*, New York: Penguin, 1992.

Charters, A. (ed.), *The Portable Jack Kerouac*, New York: Penguin, 1995, pp. 484–5.

Coupe, L., *Beat Sound, Beat Vision: The Beat Spirit and the Popular Song*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007.

Denberg, J., 'Jody Denberg's Conversation with Joni Mitchell', 8 September 1998, http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=1362 (accessed 3 July 2017).

Engdahl, H., 'The Nobel Prize in Literature 2016 – Presentation Speech', 2017, Nobelprize.org, Nobel Media AB 2014, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2016/presentation-speech.html (accessed 14 June 2017).

Enright, R., 'Words and Pictures: The Arts of Joni Mitchell', *Border Crossings*, 2001, http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=624 (accessed 15 May 2017).

Fellezs, K., 'Gender, Race, and the Ma(s)king of "Joni Mitchell"', in K. Williams and J. Williams (eds), *Cambridge Companion to the Singer-Songwriter*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 199–200.

Ginsberg, A. and B. Morgan (eds), *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, Philadelphia: First DaCapo Press, 2008.

Grace, N., *Jack Kerouac and the Literary Imagination*, New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007.

Grier, M. P., 'The Only Black Man at the Party Joni Mitchell Enters the Rock Canon', *Genders Online Journal* 56 (Fall 2012): 1–9, file://localhost/Users/mpg236/Library/Application%20 Support/Firefox/Profiles/6j2j7c18.default/zotero/storage/ZRCZHWE4/g56_grier.html (accessed 29 June 2017).

Hassan, I., 'The Problem of Influence in Literary History: Notes Towards a Definition', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 14, no. 1 (1955): 66–76.

Hogan, H., *Poetry of Relevance*, London: Methuen, 1970, http://www.jonimitchell.com/Library/view.cfm?id=3349 (accessed 17 June 2017).

Johnson, R., '"You're putting me on": Jack Kerouac and the Postmodern Emergence', *College Literature* 27, no. 1 (2000): 22–38.

Kerouac, J., *Doctor Sax*, New York: Grove Press, 1959.

Kerouac, J., *On the Road: Text and Criticism*, ed. Scott Donaldson, New York: Viking, 1979.

Leland, J., 'It's Only Rhyming Quatrains, but I Like It: Do Songs Succeed as Poetry?', *New York Times Magazine*, 8 July 2001, http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=651 (accessed 1 June 2017).

Lempert, B. R., 'Hughes/Olson: Whose Music? Whose Era?', *American Literature* 87, no. 2 (2015): 303–30.

Marom, M., *Joni Mitchell In Her Own Words: Conversations with Malka Marom*, Toronto: ECW Press, 2014.

McIntyre, T., 'Untamed Tiger', *San Francisco Examiner*, 20 October 1998, http://jonimitchell.com/library/view.cfm?id=330 (accessed 29 June 2017).

Mitchell, J., *Joni Mitchell: The Complete Poems and Lyrics*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 1997.

Monk, K., *Joni: The Creative Odyssey of Joni Mitchell*, Vancouver and Berkeley: Greystone Books, 2008.

Powell, J., *The Dictionary of Literary Influences, 1914–2000*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004.

Shay, G., 'Folklore Program', 12 March 1967, http://jonimitchell.com/music/song.cfm?id=83 (accessed 30 June 2017).

Skerl, J., *Reconstructing the Beats*, New York: Palgrave-Macmillian, 2004.

Smith, Z., 'Some Notes on Attunement: A Voyage Around Joni Mitchell', *New Yorker*, 17 December 2012, pp. 30–5.

Sornberger, L. and J. Sornberger, *Gathered Light: The Poetry of Joni Mitchell's Songs*, Toronto: Three O'Clock Press, 2013.

Sykes, B., *The Seven Daughters of Eve*, New York: Norton & Co., 2002.

Tzara, T., 'Dada Manifesto', 1918, http://391.org/manifestos/1918-dada-manifesto-tristan-tzara.html#.WUGjECMrLFw (accessed 14 May 2017).

Warner, S., *Text and Drugs and Rock 'N' Roll: The Beats and Rock Culture*, London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Weller, S., *Girls Like Us: Carole King, Joni Mitchell, Carly Simon – and the Journey of a Generation*, New York: Washington Square Press, 2008.
Whitesell, L., *The Music of Joni Mitchell*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
Wild, D., 'A Conversation with Joni Mitchell', *Rolling Stone*, 30 May 1991, http://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/a-conversation-with-joni-mitchell-19910530 (accessed 27 June 2017).
Wilson, Carl, 'An Awkward Original: The price of refusing to fit into musical – or gender – boxes', *Literary Review of Canada*, 2013, http://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2013/01/an-awkward-original/ (accessed 17 March 2017).

Discography

Mitchell, Joni, *Hissing of Summer Lawns*, Asylum, 1975.
Mitchell, Joni, *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter*, Asylum, 1977.